



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,  
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDHOOD.

BY ROBERT DURNING,  
*Formerly Master of Method at the Home and Colonial  
Training College.*

### LOVE OF KNOWLEDGE.—CURIOSITY.

#### MOTTOES :

We often instruct best when we tell nothing.  
Novelty is the parent of pleasure.

I. *Love of knowledge: how evidenced.* Note a child three or four months old when he sees some shining colour, some brilliant object; the eye fixes on it in intent, eager, often grave examination, commonly ending in a crow of delight. Hold it a little way off, and the baby flutters in his nurse's arms, and stretches out his hands to get the beautiful thing into his tiny grasp. In a year or two he recognises his friends (though many) by appearance, by voice, and by name. He knows how to use his limbs and other organs; he has become familiar with the form, the colour, the texture, the general appearance, and the names of hundreds of articles connected with dress, furniture, food, amusement; and with hundreds more of motions, actions, uses and relations of number, position, and size. He begins to contrast and compare, to classify and generalise. He perceives that the daisy, the buttercup, the harebell, the rose, are flowers and not vegetable substances merely; that azure and ultramarine are tints or shades of blue. The myriad ideas acquired before his first birthday find expression by that wonderful instrument, language, which he learns to use more and more fully day by day, rejoicing alike in its acquisition and its utterance. In children somewhat older, the same faculty is evidenced by their constant inquiries, What is this? Why can't I do it? Will you let me open the box? May I shut the knife? By their continual experiments, often involving unintentional mischief; by the eagerness with which they listen to converse between their elders,

undeterred by any proverb referring to "little pitchers." It is more satisfactorily evidenced by the conduct of a child in a strange place, a field, for instance, where he examines the most common things, weeds, stones, beetles, frogs, with lively interest; also by the eagerness with which he enters on any new study. The amount of knowledge gathered by children in their first two years of life, without the help of adults, is a perennial marvel.

#### *Conclusions drawn from these facts :*

I. That children are by nature filled with eagerness to learn all about the new world into which they have been ushered, a world which continually exhibits so varied and so imposing a spectacle. The appetite of curiosity corresponds in them to that for food, both are alike urgent and recurrent; but we should note that children desire to know, not so much what is remarkable, as what *is*. Were we to talk to a man just come from the moon, or even from China, he would interest us by telling us what he saw in the streets, how the people dressed, and what he had for dinner. Thus the distinction between common and uncommon must at first be ignored by children, to whom all things are new. This desire of the children to learn, especially in schools, is doubted by some and denied by others. That it is often weakened and sometimes destroyed is but too true; but when the appetite of children for bodily food fails, we do not assume that they never had an appetite: so when a child is harassed or irritated at his lessons, or by them, the mind becomes enfeebled and sometimes prostrated.

II. We must not demand the attention of children with regard to subjects which from their youth and inexperience they cannot care about. Any mental food will not do. It must be suitable to their taste and power of assimilation. We must not try to teach too much; the growth of the body depends not on the quantity of food swallowed, but on what is digested, so a child's education is measured not by the number of ideas forced on his mind, but on the number of those he can blend with it. We must not needlessly call the attention of children from what pleasantly engages it to something they do not care about, nor force them to continual attention until a sense of weariness supervenes. Mrs. Edgeworth cured her son of a love of cards by keeping him playing at one game for a long time.



He had, he thought, found a pleasure that would never pall; henceforward he knew better.

III. Powerful associations, accidental or otherwise, sometimes check the love of learning; an ugly or gloomy schoolroom tends to this. A woman whose husband was at sea sang the hymn, "To Zion's hill I lift mine eyes." Her little son, full of anxiety and sympathy, listened. A year afterwards, when she began the same hymn, her boy begged her to refrain. "It makes me think of the time when papa was going to sea to be drowned." Dr. Bryce, of Belfast, tells a sadder story. A playful and somewhat careless child was often punished by her governess by the imposition of tasks from the Bible, to be learned by rote. The dislike developed in the girl for the sacred book was retained by the woman. She became an Agnostic.

#### RULES FOR THE TEACHER.

Do not keep the children day after day repeating what they already know; give them something new to call forth new interest and wonder. When the object *is* new, do not waste time over familiar facts and qualities. Recapitulate rapidly, at least sometimes, and pass on to the novel, and especially to characteristic features. When the object is not new, it often may be presented in a new light, often without telling the children anything but names.

One of three or four points may be selected in giving a lesson on the bee.

I. We may take the bee as distinguished from other insects; consider:

1. Its (special) habits.
2. Its mode of working.
3. The organs with which it works.

We may take the bee as an example of an insect, to show how they are distinguished from other animals. Consider:

1. Its principal parts.
2. The different stages of its life.

We may take the bee as an example of industry:

1. Compare the habits of the bee with those of the butterfly, with reference to different periods of the year.
2. Lead the children to draw an inference as to the future destiny of man.

We may take the bee to show the distinction between instinct and intellect:

1. Compare a honeycomb with the house in which the children are—the cells alike, the rooms different.
2. Compare several honeycombs with houses known to the children. Houses differ—all cells are alike.
3. Lastly. Compare the work of the insects at different periods with the work of man—the former never varies, the latter improves by practice, and by imitation of the work of others.

Other lessons might be given on the bee as an architect; on the government of the hive as a symbol of citizenship, &c. &c.

In giving lessons on the elephant, the point may be to show the adaptation of structure to habits. Consider:

1. Habitat—food.
2. Structure, as adapted to these.

Or, to show the effect of training:

1. The wild elephant—how tamed.
2. The domesticated elephant—how used.

Or, to set forth an example of docility, consider:

1. Its size and strength.
2. Intelligence (give anecdotes).
3. Application.

Or, as an example of the characteristics of pachydermatous animals.

In simply leading them to discover for themselves parts, qualities, and uses, the teacher can thoroughly interest and instruct them, though the lesson be familiar; or they may note materials, and the tool needed to shape these for use, describing and showing the way of manipulating the latter. A lesson may be made on any pieces of stuff they themselves may collect. Good lessons may be given on things out of sight. Let the children make a list of things seen on the way to school, of their games or playthings, which they liked best, and why. The first hour in the morning makes an interesting lesson—what they do as soon as they awake; what their first thoughts were; what their order of dressing themselves; what difficulties they meet with (if the children of the poor), such as frozen water, broken bootlaces, loss of pins, and the remedies. Above all, reference would be made to the need of prayer—the key of



the day, and the lock of the night. Lessons of this character, which become wearisome if taken up often, are once or twice in the quarter most welcome to the children.

There are other negative cautions. Do not encourage the curiosity of children with respect to future events: the present is enough to them. This is sometimes done with a most injurious effect—the development of a taste for what is really intellectual gambling. It is, if possible, worse to allow the pursuit of knowledge to stand as an excuse for the neglect of any duty incident to the position in which the child may be placed.

## EDUCATION.

MASTER, Thou wilt me poor —  
 Haughty and rich am I ;  
 In self-dependence rich,  
 Presuming, hard, and high :  
 Faith, looking on the coming years, doth see  
 Dark faults, sore failures, let to humble me.  
 Thy will be done !

A mourner must I be :  
 And holy messengers  
 Oft have Thy presence left,  
 To bring me blessed tears :  
 Too soon they fail, and sin's hot breath sweeps by :  
 Then wilt Thou take the spot and show it me,  
 Till, weeping, fain I turn to hide in Thee :  
 Thy will be done !

Meek wouldst Thou have Thy child :  
 How little can I bear !  
 How seldom wait for Thee,  
 Quiet, within Thy care !  
 Though through provokings, teach me to endure,  
 Bid errors make me of myself less sure :  
 Thy will be done !

A hung'ring, thirsting one  
 Must Thy disciple be ;  
 And I so full ! grown fat  
 On Thy gifts, leaving Thee !  
 But Thou wilt teach me want, or take away  
 All lesser food till Thou my only stay :  
 Thy will be done !